

The Literary London Journal



Review

Simon Rycroft, *Swinging City: A Cultural Geography of London 1950-1974*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, 200 pages, ISBN: 978-0-7546-4830-7. £55.

Reviewed by

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<1>Published under the auspices of Ashgate's Re-Materialising Cultural Geography series, Simon Rycroft's *Swinging City* tunes into a broad range of cultural sources to construct an experiential portrait of London during its international moment in the mid-1960s. This London looms large in the cultural imaginary – the afterimages of Mary Quant's design, Vidal Sassoon's hair styles and Michelangelo Antonioni's foreigner's-eye-view *Blowup* (1966) – but Rycroft quickly dispenses with any notion that he is going to rely on dredging up the typical accounts of the usual subjects. Even though Rycroft does engage with the visual legacy of mid-1960s London, he is largely interested in a newer study of materiality that looks at culture in its moment of consumption, even if such transience means that the consumed meanings seemingly vanish without a trace (14-15). In other words, Rycroft re-materialises the study of Swinging London by combining considerations of frequently vetted aspects of that cultural moment (youth films, the publications and hangouts of the nascent London counterculture) with a consideration of the abstract (Bridget Riley's op art) and the ephemeral (the light shows that accompanied musical performances at club UFO). *Swinging City* starts with a pre-history of the swinging ethos, discusses the height of the label's popularity (the summer of 1966, which coincided with a famous *Time* cover story by Piri Halasz), and looks at the aftermath of the scene as some elements morphed into a counterculture whose politics and press helped define the city on a world stage well into the 1970s.

<2>This is not a book about London in a literal sense. As Rycroft admits early on, the style, aesthetics and social order of swinging London had a global geographical history, so much so that many of the innovations with which London of the 1960s became associated were in fact not of London (21). Here, Rycroft joins Howard Malchow, whose recent book *Special Relations: The Americanization of Britain?* (2011) similarly admits that the peculiarly British aspects of the swinging city were largely a set of compromises

and meetings-halfway with American culture at large. Rycroft offers a compelling slate of mainly literary sources that fed into the ideas of the London counterculture (ideas that were also present, in less rigorous ways, during the largely commercialised and publicly hyped moment of 1966-1967). He demonstrates how the Beat generation (Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti) became an inspired source of freethinking and bohemian living. Their writings had a sense of immediacy, and even danger, that eclipsed the establishment credentials of native literary coteries like the earlier Bloomsbury group. The lasting influence of the Beats, combined with the provincial frustrations and class awareness of the Angries (the Angry Young Men, whose ranks included such disparate writers as Colin Wilson, Kingsley Amis, Alan Sillitoe and Doris Lessing), defined the popular strain of literary dissent during the late 1950s. Taken together, their commitment to social mobility (or of dropping out of the game altogether), freedom of expression against prevailing cultural conventions and their critique of the technocratic agenda of militarised democracies (whose beliefs in science and progress were largely tied to a Cold War agenda) painted them as kindred spirits.

<3>The look that defined swinging London was also sourced in American (as well as broadly modernist and international) influences in the design and art worlds. The popular vernacular of the Festival of Britain helped popularise the idea of the city-as-playground, a kind of fun frivolity unimaginable during the height of the Blitz (45-46). While this may seem like one of the primary sources of the transformation into a swinging metropolis, Rycroft wisely qualifies this by separating the largely commercial nature of swinging London from the governmental function of the Festival of Britain, whose goal (in addition to entertaining an embittered nation) was to instruct the citizenry on the securities, advances and goals of the Welfare State. The artists associated with Pop Art (Richard Hamilton, Peter Blake, Pauline Boty and so on) perhaps better suited the swinging city's relationship to popular culture. Blurring the high and low traditions, these artists took genre and compositional ideas from art and used that visual language to venerate their (largely American) commercial heroes. For all their nascent postmodernism and the revelatory vision of their achievements, Pop Art has since become as commonplace as studio portraiture. The accessibility and ordinariness of Pop fed effortlessly into the brief flourish of the swinging city.

<4>Rycroft is at his best when he looks at the some of the least traditional sources of cultural meaning. His chapter 'Lightshows and Multi-media Environments: Cosmic Connections and the Countercultural Subject' ties Gene Youngblood's concept of expanded cinema and the contemporary topicality of Marshall McLuhan's ideas on media and consciousness to explain the appeal of these fleetingly spectacular performances (154, 156-157). The combination of music, lights, mind-altering substances and a newly free sense of stage performance definitively tied the San Francisco scene to London. Jack Braceland's lights for Pink Floyd and their UFO performances create an emblematic cypher for the period (one captured in film by Peter Whitehead, a filmmaker whose unprecedented access to the key players of the counterculture help define the era for posterity). Such events engaged the mind, body and senses like nothing before.

<5>*Swinging City* is not without some shortcomings (I hesitate to call them flaws, since some are wilful omissions). Since Rycroft makes such a compelling case for a long front of culture that encompasses everything from advertisements to happenings, he inevitably gives key material milestones short shrift. His discussion of 1960s films about London is brief (two pages) and only mentions a few well-known examples like *Darling*

(1965, John Schlesinger) and *Georgy Girl* (1966, Silvio Narizzano) (79-80). This omits many films from the era that fit his interests – he quite perceptively points out that swinging London films often feature the city itself as a character – from the quotidian and broad such as *The Sandwich Man* (1966, Robert Hartford-Davis) to the rarefied and experimental like *Herostratus* (1967, Don Levy). Given Rycroft's preference for performance, he might have spent more time on the stage productions that defined the city, from the new drama of the Royal Court to Peter Hall's contemporary stagings of Shakespeare, through conceptually challenging work like *Oh What a Lovely War* (1963). When he does discuss performance, he sticks to examples with heavy associations with the counterculture (for example, the Wholly Communion poetry reading at the Royal Albert Hall in 1965), which slightly diminishes the widespread international recognition of the innovations of the British stage.

<6>Still, focusing on what is absent does not change Rycroft's substantial contribution to the retrospective cultural imaginary of 1960s London. His mental map of the idea of London during this period will interest readers in search of an expanded sense of this smashing time.

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